

THE INTERSUBJECTIVE ROOTS OF PRETEND PLAY

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ABSTRACT

Pretend play has been studied in great depth in the past four decades, yielding an increasingly rich body of evidence and conjectures about the evolutionary, cognitive, social and linguistic competence acquired by young children through make-believe activities. In the current work, we drew connections between symbolic play and early forms of infants' humorous initiatives, such as clowning and teasing, shedding light on the similarities between some of their constitutive aspects. To do so, we endorsed an intersubjective and socio-cultural stance which allowed expanding our current understanding of, and reflections on the roots of pretend play and its development, from something happening inside individuals to the relation it contributes to create between individuals and their social and cultural environments. Above all, we suggest that what these earlier and later forms of symbolic actions have in common is mostly their interpretative dimension: they are spaces in which infants and children can construct and explore different kinds of realities with meaningful others. We then consider the implications for theories of symbol formation and language development.

KEYWORDS: pretend play, clowning, teasing, infancy, language development, meaning-making

I. INTRODUCTION

“Now let us play hide and seek. Should you hide in my heart it would not be difficult to find you. But should you hide behind your own shell, then it would be useless for anyone to seek you.”

K. Gibran (1925), *Sand and Foam*

There is a sofa in the middle of the living room. On one side of the sofa, hidden behind a big, squared cushion, an 11-month-old infant-dragon (D) is laughing naughtily while intermittently peeking out of the cushion to check on the brave 2,5-year-old knight, his brother. At the other side of the sofa, the knight (G) is preparing to engage a fierce battle against that monstrous dragon lurking in the cave-behind-the-cushion. This exchange follows:

Example 1:

G: *I've come to get you, dragon. I've found you... your home. Come out* [climbing up on the cushion]

D: [Peeks out, laughing, then withdraws behind the cushion, still laughing]

G: “I've seen you. Come out! I'm going to use a...[fetching a stick] my sword”

D: [Peeks out again with a grinning expression and crimped nose, looks at the stick] “*Ahhww*”
[retreats behind the cushion while groaning, then comes out again]¹

While G is fully immersed in his role as a noble brave knight, D may be unaware of his role as a dragon in his brother's imaginary battle. Yet, we would argue that they are both equally playing their parts in this game, and their pretending activity – despite different - is equally fun and entertaining. This is because the play scenario is an interactional framework sequentially organised and built upon the behaviours of both children, incorporating them within an imaginary script. In this shared pretend framework each child's move is an affordance for the other (for a discussion on social affordances please refer to Costall 1995, 2014; and Rączaszek-Leonardi et al. 2013), interpreted and responded coherently by the co-participants according to their imagined plots enacted in that moment. While G is enacting his fantasy plot about being a knight, D is fully immersed in another pretend plot: hiding; his bodily and affective expressions display his unwavering belief that no one can see him. He is playing “as if”, as much as his older brother is. Yet, as distant and dis-aligned as their imaginary plots can be, they are both reciprocally engaged in attending to each other, sharing an affectively-loaded, mutual and intimate intersubjective experience. If anything, this speaks for the extent to which pretence uniquely shapes the co-players' interactional possibility of influencing each other's affective and participatory experience (De Jaegher, Di Paolo 2008), even in the face of asymmetries in their individual cognitive, communicative or interpretative capabilities.

¹ This description of two brothers interacting is from a home video-recording by first author.

Children's play has been a flourishing area of interest for both developmental psychologists and early childhood educators. Even though researchers have investigated and categorised forms of play - functional play, rough-and-tumble play, constructive play, pretend or symbolic play - one form often blends in or transforms into one another (Garvey 1990); and despite some recent critical discussions (see Lillard et al. 2013), there is general consensus among scientists that play, in almost all its different forms, supports and creates unique developmental opportunities in socio-cognitive, motor, affective and communicative arenas (Sutton-Smith 1967, 1979; Smith 2010; Taylor 2013; Christie 2021). The present work focuses on *social pretend play* in early childhood, also referred to as imaginative, symbolic, or fantasy play, involving one or more participants. Pretend play is usually defined as an activity with a symbolic character, in which a signifier (e.g., a banana) is used to represent the meaning of a signified (e.g., a telephone). Objects and actions (but also affective expression, at times) are thus separated from their original meanings, the banana becoming a phone and the act of bringing the banana to one's ear enabling "talking on the phone" (Leslie 1987). Because of this symbolic character, pretend play has been proposed to be of theoretical relevance for the development of language. This proposal has been guided by an increasingly prominent interest in understanding the child's emerging capacity to use symbols to communicate (Werner, Kaplan 1963; Bates et al. 1979). Piaget (1962) saw symbolic understanding of objects and events as underlying the capacity for both pretend play and language, and proponents of this approach in general have interpreted the mastery of language as evidence of the child's emerging capacity for symbolic representation (McCune-Nicolich 1981; McCune 1995).

Often considered as an index of a child's maturing cognitive functions, pretend play has been studied in great depth in the past four decades, yielding an increasingly rich body of evidence and conjectures about the evolutionary, cognitive, social and linguistic competence acquired by young children through, and in order to engage in, make-believe activities (Fein 1992; Lillard 2017). However, in most cases researchers have focused on pretend play primarily as an activity involving verbal or quasi-verbal participants, resulting from specific cognitive and mentalistic accomplishments (Reddy, Williams & Costall 2022). Yet, defining pretend play as a cognitively- grounded end-product of the process of decoupling mental representations from realities has important consequences for how we investigate pretence, and the role of early play and interactions in drawing the pathway to the gradual development of more complex capacities, such as language. For instance, it excludes investigating the emergence of symbolic activities in the younger members of our cultural niche, who do not yet possess higher representational capacities, such as infants. In this work, we want to argue in favour of a continuity in development pathways involving early interpersonal experiences, pretence and language.

To address this issue, socio-cultural approaches have framed pretend play as the by-product of situated and culturally-mediated socialisation practices (Garvey 1990; Gaskins 2013; Breathnach, Danby & O'Gorman 2018). Embedded within this perspective, the present work frames pretend play

as an interpretative, intersubjective and organised activity (Bateson 1955), oriented towards actively and creatively making sense of participants' social experiences (Göncü, Gaskins 2011). Most importantly, it draws attention to the role of early caregiver-infant interactions as socialisation practices wherein "as if" behaviours are enacted very early in daily exchanges (Göncü 1993; Gaskins 2013). This is achieved through micro-level interactional features: from parents' adopting a particular tone of voice in book reading in order to embody a character, to playing peek-a-boo. Also, the infant's behaviours are responded by the adult "as if" they were relevant and meaningful contributions, enabling the infant to "act their part" in pretend play from day one of their lives (Rączaszek-Leonardi et al. 2013). More specifically, we propose that a developmental continuity exists between those early practices and later forms of pretend play by advancing two main hypotheses: 1) pretence has its early onset in the infant's early experience of affectively moving and being moved by others in social engagements; 2) well-coordinated forms of social pretend play evident in preschool children share roots with early humorous initiatives and activities, such as clowning and teasing, reported in infancy from around 8 months of age (Reddy 1991, 2001). Reflecting on these two points, we draw from socio-cultural, situated, embodied approaches to take the development of pretend play out of children's minds and cognitive abilities and reposition it in early interactive, ritualised, engagements with others.

II. EXISTING EVIDENCE ON SOCIAL PRETEND PLAY (SPP)

While pretend play seems to be a well-established developmental landmark, variations exist in its quality, emergence and developmental progress across different contexts and cultures (Roopnarine, Johnson & Hooper 1994; Edwards 2000; Göncü, Vadeboncoeur 2015). The capacity of detaching meanings from objects, considered as the earliest form of pretence, is usually indexed by the emergence of simple pretend gestures (Haight, Miller 1993) and object substitutions (Jackowitz, Watson 1980) around 12 to 14 months of age, as in using a banana to make a phone call. Engaging in pretence activities increases dramatically in duration, frequency and quality throughout the second year, when play episodes become more frequent and more complex, both linguistically and interactionally (Piaget 1945). Pretence then reaches a peak in preschool years (around 3 to 5 years of age; Smith, Lillard 2012), when frequent transformations (from one type of scenario/role/function to one other) and multifaceted imaginary identities make their appearance (Garvey 1990; Engel 2013; Taylor 2013).

Many different aspects may influence the play quality in social pretend play (SPP) among which: the quality and richness of previous social experiences and the presence of one or more play partners, their specific interpersonal/affective matching, as well as their age. The presence of an older, more experienced player for instance, seems to positively influence the play quality and duration, often simply because more complex language is available (Zukow 1986; Jaggy et al. 2020) increasing

the complexity of the “pretence gradient” or level (McCune-Nicolich 1981; Slade 1987). With the adult’s support, the pretence quality of play changes to become more abstract (i.e., detached from the real context) but also more structured in terms of planning of action sequences, verbally anticipating or re-naming the others’ actions before these are enacted. An example of this is reported below.

Example 2:

[G, who is 2.5 years old, and his dad are engaged in a lively duel between two different Indian tribes; they are both wearing feathered headbands and manoeuvring self-made war hatchets. G. suddenly stops fighting and lies down on the floor. Dad reckons that G. may be tired and takes this opportunity to close off the play activity]

Dad: “Let’s take a break and make peace; I now [pretending to dig] bury the hatchet to make peace”.

G: sits up saying “I *bury* my hatchet”²

In this extract, the father anticipates G’s wish to end the game. By proposing to make peace, he is ending the play activity while maintaining a focus on the play framework, thus ensuring a continuity in the interactional flow despite the change in activity. The child can re-use this strategy in his future pretend play as a way to transform activities by smoothly transitioning between different play scenarios without breaking off the imaginary framework. Over time, this strategy might be also particularly helpful for construing linguistically-richer interactional scenarios (e.g., narratives) and towards accomplishing more coordinated interactional tasks.

Social pretence hinges on the participatory presence of the other – which also means, for instance, that one player is usually transformed into a particular character only by virtue of *what the other has become or intends to become*. In some cases, this presence results in sharing the enactment of co-constructed narratives. In other cases, the other’s presence remains on the side, as when each child is attentively oriented towards her own play activity while sharing a physical space with one other, and the pretend activities run in parallel. These two modalities can easily alternate and blend reciprocally as the play unfolds – there might be moments of shared or complementary, fun-filled engagement, preceded or followed by more solitary moments of playing alone. From a broader perspective, SPP should be regarded as an inherently, socially shaped activity regardless, or even in the absence, of physical play partners, to the extent that even as a solitary activity its enactments are always reflexively social: they are reflections of children’s rich social world and experience of daily interactions within it (Gaskins, Haight & Lancy 2007; Gaskins 2013). Within this perspective, the

² In the original Italian G. said “*seppello*” replacing the correct but complex verb tense used by his father (i.e., “*seppellisco*”) with an incorrect form. As this example shows, pretence narratives co-constructed with more competent partners allow for more complex language learning by, for instance, adopting a variety of verb tenses. Extract is from a home video-recording by the first author.

broadest socio-cultural environment as well as participants' individual differences shape the quality and content of pretence scenarios, crafting ways and opportunities to participate in them.

From a developmental research perspective, the observational and analytical focus is therefore shifted on describing the pretence activity from the point of view of its actors (Giffin 1984) and the interpretative endeavour emerging from it as a culture in-the-making process of its own, a “creative production and performance of peer cultures. In pretend play, new peer cultures are produced as children actively and creatively appropriate information from the adult world” (Breathnach, Danby & O’Gorman 2018:291). A *culture* presenting its interactive means and repertoires regulated by locally negotiated norms and meanings, whereby “in the privacy and safety of play with its principles of entry and organisation, children coordinate their movement toward mastery of basic social conventions and principles” (Fein 1976:60).

Features considered as key in SPP

Within the rich literature on social pretend play from the preschool years onwards, a few elements are considered as signatures. First and foremost, playing partners usually know (and to some extent, agree upon) that they are partaking in an activity embedded within an “as if” reality, so that communicative and behavioural moves are shaped to fit the current imaginative context(s) of the play activity. Such knowledge is often instantiated on the play activity itself, as children mark the shift into pretend play, and negotiate its beginning by deploying particular linguistic practices (Schmidt, Zinken 2021). Nevertheless, in the attempt of searching for early developmental instances of pretence in infancy, it is worth considering that infants are not only drawn into the structure of meaningful early interactions and conventionalised routines and games without having to display an understanding of these (e.g., Gleason, Weintraub 1976; Snow et al. 1987; Rączaszek-Leonardi et al. 2013); but they also have expectations on the multimodal and sequential format of these structures, on which their participation depends (Fantasia et al, 2014, 2016).

Second, the symbolic nature of pretence is usually considered as grounded in (and enabling the understanding of) the pragmatic experience of separating meanings from objects and actions, that is, from their concrete, real use. This practice of abstracting and decontextualising object meanings (in its broadest sense) from their real function was also regarded as central for language acquisition and understanding (Piaget 1945; Vygotsky 1967, 2004; Clark 2020). However, research evidence on pretend play have also highlighted how children’s communicative repertoire becomes increasingly richer, situated and ritualised over time (Orr 2021). That is: children use a language which is hardwired within the play scenarios they are constructing, with recurrent formats and patterns (e.g., in terms of words, idioms, syntactic structures, symbolic meanings; Quinn, Donnelly & Kidd 2018). Moreover, communication is highly indexical, continuously repaired and marked, with topics transformed, replenished and negotiated. As Garvey and Berndt (1975) proposed, in pretence “a great deal of speech is devoted to creating, clarifying, maintaining or negotiating the social pretend

experience” (Garvey, Berndt 1975:10), while the core content lies precisely in the elements subject to transformation (i.e., role, object, action plan) around which SPP is organised. Yet again, when considering the development of pretend play, how and when would we be able to identify a separation of meaning and objects for an activity to be considered a “pretend” activity? Here, approaches positing decontextualised definitions of symbols and meaning are bound to set the bar quite high for young infants – and for our understanding of the earliest roots of pretence. One way of approaching this problem is by taking an intersubjective stance (Trevarthen 1993) implying that symbolic communication emerges out of earlier forms of meaningful understanding of the “aboutness” of dyadic interpersonal interactions with others, without having to depend on symbolic mediation. Which means: instead of looking for pretence in triadic interactions in which objects are used to represent other objects, one could focus on dyadic interactions in which the elements subject to transformation are people and their bodily and vocal expressions. This might support our understanding of how pretence develops in infancy and provide a continuity approach to how earlier forms might lead to later forms of pretence.

Finally, engaging in a pretence activity requires the building of a shared attentional framework by means of sensitive intersubjective and reciprocal signals, such as inviting and sustaining joint attentional patterns, maintaining sequentially-crafted interactional turns, sustaining a shared spatial interactional framework over interactional time. Yet, in interactions with younger infants, cycles of engagement and disengagement are usually very short, with only intermittently sustained mutual attention. This often creates what we could call “intersubjective micro-moments”, which last a few seconds, and are distributed across longer caregiving activities. Looking at different developmentally appropriate temporal resolutions of early playful interactions might also provide insights into up to now unnoticed forms of pretence. We present examples supporting these arguments in the next paragraph.

Taking a continuity approach to development, we suggest that earlier forms of pretence in infancy might be outlined if we shift our focus to other kinds of expression or different temporal resolutions, which infants are already capable of.

III. SEARCHING FOR EARLY FORMS OF PRETEND PLAY: CLOWNING AND TEASING

Two preliminary assumptions

Pretend play reflects changes in how a child engages with the social world. To understand the developmental breadth of these changes, researchers have looked closely into children’s pretend activities, providing insights into how imaginary realities - their structure, language, actions - are created and coordinated by co-players (Giffin 1984; Slade 1987; Garvey 1990). To date, however, little attention was devoted to investigating the roots of pretend play (see for instance, Howes,

Matheson 1992; Robinson 2019; Reddy et al. 2022); and in most cases, this was narrowed down to focusing on single behaviours as precursors of later, more complex pretence-related and cognitive skills (such as: emotion regulation, joint attention, mind reading or role-reversal abilities; Fein 1981; Lillard, Pinkham & Smith 2011; Rakoczy 2008). However, in light of recent positions questioning causal claims about the unique importance of pretend play, engaged epistemological reflections on its roots and role in early development are needed (Lillard et al. 2013). Such reflections should be aimed at seeking answers to questions such as: *what kinds of early intersubjective engagements prepare the ground for later, richer symbolic play formats?* And, perhaps more importantly: *how does infants' participation change within those types of interactions over developmental time?* To address these questions, we consider two preliminary assumptions as key for rethinking how pretence is conceived and thus investigated from infancy. First of all, not all shared pretend activities are initiated, accomplished by, and built through fixed interactional patterns or structures; second, in social make-believe play, pretence levels and topics need not to be always aligned. We will now expand on both these assumptions.

The array of possible interactional practices and patterns at play in organising and structuring the “stages” of an “as if” activity is wide. A few interactional elements are considered as defining within pretend play literature, e.g., verbally agreeing on which imaginary characters or roles are assigned to whom. However, establishing an explicit meta-narrative framework for starting pretence may be unnecessary, or exceed participants’ competencies. In some cases, negotiating *what we are going to play and how* may rely on more implicit and multimodal interactional strategies often made up along the way (Sawyer 2003). There might be cases in which co-players do not need to openly and preliminarily construct an imaginary scenario or “as if” framework to initiate their pretence activity. As Sawyer (2003) suggested, pretend play can be achieved through different levels of explicitness, on a continuum ranging from implicit ones originating within the play frame or character, to explicit strategies which are out of frame and in which participants expressly discuss how to structure the play. Early forms of social games involving behaviours along the line of violating someone’s expectations, like in peak-a-boo, are often initiated spontaneously while infants and adults are interacting, without any explicit forms of prior agreement on the content or the framework. Their initiation or maintenance may take more situated and enacted shapes, as in the following example reported during an interview by the mother of an 11-month-old infant:

“she’s been crawling more now... (...). And she’s got this habit now of like, say I’m holding her and my husband come up to get her and she’ll pretend to go to him and then she’ll back off. And that’s with anyone, like even if my Mum comes round and I say ‘go to nanny’, she’ll like put her hands out to go and then she’ll back off...” “She will laugh, she thinks that’s really funny, because they go ‘oh, um’ and she’d keep doing it...” been happening within the last month ... “She’s looking at the person she’s going to go to, ‘cos they’re speaking to her ‘come on then’ like that and they put their arms out to get her and

she'll go to turn towards them and then like back off and laugh over my shoulder.” (Reddy, Williams & Costall 2022, p.8)

In this episode, the playful teasing enacted by the infant, as she pretends to go towards her parents and then backs off, seems to be emerging and unfolding spontaneously out of her initiative, without an open agreement. And indeed, parents' amusingly surprised reaction over the infant's unexpected behaviour was exactly what made it playfully teasing and fun. Participants' awareness of, and commitment to, being part of an “as if” activity was guided by the build-up and release of tension construed through timely, reciprocal expressions of attention and affects (Evaldsson, Corsaro 1998).

In a recent analysis of pretend play interactions, Schmidt and Zinken (2021) illustrated how the level of explicitness might be modulated through transformations of the play frame as evidenced by the use of the expression *'aus Spiel'* (*'for play'*). Making transformations enables creating more imaginary worlds. In some interactions, the external environment might be sufficiently structured for the symbolic actions to take place “implicitly”, regardless of whether participants communicate what they are going to do beforehand. Take, for instance, the case of two toddlers at the Kindergarten, who find themselves near a play kitchen at the same time. They may start pretending to have a joint tea party, one pouring tea from a teapot into the other's teacup, while the other is holding the cup. In this case, the contextual element (both in terms of object affordance as well as previous experience of play with that kitchen) provides the necessary, minimal condition for the play to start. In other cases, structuring rules may also emerge along during the interaction, resulting, for instance, from shared action patterns, repeatedly performed by co-players, e.g., when a sequence of play actions become so familiar that participants expect actions to happen in that particular way.

Infants are gradually drawn into conventionalised forms of interaction through repetitive daily experiences of play. In social routines, they learn to recognise complex interactional formats and to perform particular actions contingently within an action sequence (Ratner, Bruner 1978; Fantasia et al. 2016). Restricted action formats embedded within play sequences and involving only a limited number of elements, such as peek-a-boo, allow infants' to actively participate in games at a very young age just by relying on the predictability of their structure (Fantasia et al. 2014). This was recently shown for infants as young as 4 and 6 months old (Nomikou et al. 2017), suggesting that repeated playful interactions with meaningful adults are intrinsically valuable learning contexts in which infants learn how to participate, before developing an understanding of the real and the imagined, just by learning what to do when and how to respond.

The second assumption to consider is this: in SPP, pretence levels (or gradients; Nicholic 1981) and topics need not to be always aligned. That is: under certain circumstances, a pretence activity can go on without a shared focus as long as co-players are engaged in an “as if” framework, relying on and maintaining a physical and conversational co-presence. The play interaction sketched in Example 1 is a good example of this: G and D are both engaged in a lively shared pretence

interaction, attending to each other, close enough to share a physical space (the sofa); and yet, each of them is enacting a different imaginary script, G impersonating a knight, D displaying an appearing and disappearing routine. In infancy, similar examples may be found in peak-a-boo routines: a one-year-old infant may hide behind a cloth while the adult, laughing, asks “she’s not here anymore, where is she gone?”. Even within its many variants, playing peak-a-boo enables participants to endorse and experience different pretence gradients by means of their different perceptual, experiential or meta-cognitive capacities (as in the case of infants playing with older, more experienced partners). In peak-a-boo, when the infant hides under a cloth, or when her eyes are covered by her own or the other’s hands, she might be genuinely convinced of being hidden or having disappeared from the other’s view (Bruner 1975). Or she might not. But her behavioural displays suggest, at the very least, that as the caregivers enact their role as the surprised finder, the infant may be waiting to be found. The adult, on her part, engages in a more complex pretence gradient in which she is pretending to align with the infant’s pretence of being invisible. As a result, participants are both construing and maintaining a shared “as if” framework, although with different epistemic contents.

Both these assumptions allow for an extended view of how pretence is conceived, to include a wider array of imaginary activities, scenarios and participatory possibilities (e.g., verbal, multimodal, involving physical distance or closeness), where participants do not always have to explicitly agree upon play rules or roles; rather, their actions share a reciprocally-sustained affective tension, something that binds them to the ongoing activity and to each other’s’ moves, emotions, and gestures into account. A moment of laughter or collusion, a playful intimacy, a tension-releasing pause. In this view, children’s imaginary play activity may be seen in continuity with early playful exchanges involving a similar level of implicit transformation. What these different forms of shared actions have in common is mostly their interpretative dimension: they are spaces in which infants and children can construct and explore different kinds of realities with meaningful others. Most importantly, what makes these interaction formats alternative realities and therefore good candidates for pretend play is not a fully blown representation of the “reality” and a “decoupling” from it. Rather the roots of symbolic qualities are found in the ability of the dyad to go beyond the usual, “conventionalised” ways of interacting with each other. This alternative enactment, we argue might be a first form of displacement (Clark 2016), on the way to the development of decontextualised symbolic abilities.

Teasing and Clowning

Playful teasing and clowning can be considered as early instantiations of pretence in infancy. Teasing has been defined as a behaviour whose “core elements are [...] an intentional provocation and playful off-record markers, which together comment on something relevant to the target” (Keltner et al. 2001:235). In infancy, these types of behaviours have been observed since very early on: “From around 9 months of age, infants are capable of stepping outside the theme of an ongoing interaction

and playfully disrupting it by doing what might be called the mis-expected” (Reddy, Mireault 2015). Teasing becomes a playfully provocative activity when its purpose is deliberately intended to overturn or violate the original meaning of an action or its pragmatic function in order to elicit a reaction by the other, to test the affective boundaries of a new social situation or simply to grab the other’s attention. It involves “playing with surprise, with the boundaries of accepted patterns, [*that*] can function to test the limits of someone’s reactions or of the tolerance of a system” (Reddy, Mireault 2015). That is: to be unexpected (and fun), actions need to be *first* known and expected in a certain way and time.

Research studies report that at 9 months infants can playfully tease their interactional partner by pretending to offer an object, then withdrawing it as she reaches out to take it, as showed in Example 6.

Example 6:

In the living room G, 9,5-month-old, is sitting on the floor playing with toys with his father. While picking up his favourite teddy, G makes a squeaking vocalisation catching his father’s attention. The father smiles, asking G to give him the teddy while pointing towards it. To this request, G first looks at the adult, then gazes back at the object, and finally extends his arm hesitantly, as if he was indeed about to hand over the object. Then, while looking at his father with a mocking expression, and as soon as the father’s approaching hand was ready to take the object, G immediately withdraws the offer, hiding hand and object behind his back, bursting with laughter. At this, the father replies pretending to take the teasing offence very seriously.³

At 11 months the typical course of a familiar action can be playfully and suddenly changed, transformed into something else. This is what Reddy (2001) defined as an “almost compliance” teasing action, as the infant pretends to comply with a course of action requested by the adult, but intentionally fails to do so (or she does so but inadequately). At 12 months, teasing can take the form of using common objects in unusual/atypical ways, or it can involve pretending to use objects that do not exist with the clear purpose of making the other laugh (Palacios, Rodriguez 2015; Reddy, Mireault 2015). In doing so, as the infant produces an unexpected action she is pretending to be unaware (or unfamiliar) of the rules underlying that action, and of the other person’s reaction to it. In this context, pretence hinges on playing with one’s own and others’ expectations of how actions should unfold, as it manifests in the more or less explicit intention to violate them within a playful framework. Far from being conceived of as an individualistic representational ability, intentionality is viewed here as an interactional and embodied skill, instantiated through continuous intersubjective

³ Edited description taken from first authors’ family diary report.

exchanges between infants and caregivers. In these exchanges, affective and mental states are shared and understood through the whole coordination of movements, facial expressions, posture, vocalizations. Such form of intentionality is supported as much by early socialisation to meaningful, sequentially structured daily routine actions; as by the capacity to playfully transform, within interaction, ongoing actions located in the here and now.

Closely positioned to playing with the other's expectations and reactions, there is *clowning*. Reports of clowning behaviours in infancy are scarce, most likely due to their spontaneous, unpredictable nature which is difficult to capture in ecological studies and even more unlikely to be ecologically re-elicited in lab settings. Infants seem to be sensitive to others' joking and humorous behaviours already at 7 months (Sroufe, Wunsch 1972; Hubley, Trevarthen 1979), but it is not until the end of the first year, from around 8-9 months, that humorous behaviours are produced with the intention of making others' laugh (Reddy 2001). This is done by means of nonsense behaviours openly violating "normal patterns of social life (ways of interacting with people or of handling objects, for instance) specifically to elicit or re-elicite amusement" (Reddy, Mireault 2015). At 8 months infants seem already able to display clowning behaviours presenting an "as if" quality by using vocalisations such as making fake coughs or fake laughing, or imitating sounds made by adults (Reddy 2001). By 11 months they make unusual pretend actions, such as putting a dummy in the mother's mouth, holding up feet pretending they are smelly, imitating others' odd actions (like snoring) (Reddy 2001). From 8 to 13 months, infants produce an extensive range of spontaneous clowning behaviours from making weird sounds (from 7 months) or faces (from 8 months) to imitating other's odd actions (at 11 months; see Reddy 2001 for a complete list).

Both teasing and clowning have been described as opportunities to test one's own and other's expectations about a certain social situation and grab others' attention by triggering (hopefully) positive reactions (Reddy 2001; Reddy, Mireault 2015). These types of interactions are so spontaneous and frequent that most caregivers have experienced them at some point. And still, not much attention has been dedicated to investigating their broadest developmental impact or continuity with other emerging developmental processes. Here, we propose that a continuity exists between these early behaviours and pretend play, with regard to two aspects: 1) the infant's re-enactment of previous meaningful social experiences, that are modified or transformed into something completely different or unreal (imaginary); 2) a situated and dynamically emerging interactional dimension of pretence through which emotions, roles, relational narratives and meanings can be safely re-defined and negotiated. Table 1 presents a non-exhaustive list of playful teasing episodes, including performatives and gestures, as reported by either previous studies or descriptions from the authors' own video-recordings.

<i>Action</i>	<i>Type of pretence involved</i>	<i>Age of observation</i>	<i>Reported by</i>
Object Offers	Pretending to give: Starting to offer an object to someone, then withdrawing it as they reach out	8 months	Keltner et al., 2001; Reddy 2001; Reddy & Mireault, 2015
Pointing to objects	Pretending to want: Requesting a drink then refusing it when offered	Between 9-11 months	Reddy, Williams & Costall, 2022
Almost non-compliance	Pretending to non-comply: Almost doing a forbidden act but stopping short	Between 9-11 months	Reddy et al., 2022
Almost Compliance	Pretending to comply with a familiar action sequence but stopping before its end: moving cup away just before the caregiver is pouring milk in during breakfast	11 months	Extract from first author's report on family diary; Reddy et al., 2022
Facial expressions	Pretending affective states out of context: displaying facial expressions of being angry (as to imitate the interactional partner's angry face) and bursting into laughter thereafter	12 months	Extract from first author's home-based video-recording
Mis-labelling	Pretending to make an error: Calling parent/relatives by the wrong name	12 months	Reddy, 1991; Reddy et al., 2022
Action with non-existent object	Pretending object existence: Picking up imaginary food and putting it in bowl	12 months	Palacio & Rodriguez, 2015; Reddy & Mireault, 2015

Table 1. Categories of playful teasing involving a non-exhaustive list of early pretend actions.

In pretence interactions as well as in playful teasing and clowning, actions, affect, objects and words maintain their symbolic character as long as participants recognise and validate it. The symbolic value of a cup imagined as a hat, or of a handful of wooden sticks becoming a soldiers' army preparing for battle against leafy armed forces, is meaningfully acknowledged and understood only by those engaged in the pretence or humorous interaction. An example described by Reddy (2001) makes this point very clearly:

“Sh, 11m, imitates her great grandmother's snoring face, she is detecting, and offering to others her detection, of something odd about the expression. She is not, as an adult clown might do, linking in with centuries of cultural knowledge and jokes about the infirmities of old age. It is only the embarrassed and suppressed laughter of the others around her that contains that knowledge and makes her act so funny.” (Reddy 2001, p. 250)

Similarly, the subtle tension created by an infant's absurd action can easily fall outside the boundaries of what is considered as humorous, to land on the other side of the fence becoming too inappropriate; this may be the case, for instance, of an infant's blowing raspberries becoming too

lively and “wet” (according to the adult), so that adult calls out to quit it and return to either a non-play situation or an “acceptable” way of doing it: “as if” suddenly switches back to “as in”.

Overall, it is not surprising that pretend play and its developmental purport has been consistently looked at through the lenses of intersubjectivity (Bateson 1955; Vygotsky 1967; Bruner 1983; Göncü, Gaskins 2011; Lillard 2017), as this is the way through which a reciprocal understanding of the play experience is constructed. Beyond roles and rules, in pretence as well as infants’ early humorous initiatives, each participant’s enacted⁴ move is grounded in - and often resulting from- the possibility of moving others, overturning their expectations and the current reality to create a new, shared one.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

In the current work, we drew connections between pretend play and early forms of infants’ humorous initiatives, such as clowning and teasing, shedding light on the similarities between some of their constitutive aspects. To do so, we endorsed an intersubjective and socio-cultural stance which allowed to expand our current understanding of, and reflections on the roots of pretend play and its development. Our proposal moves away from conceiving pretence as something happening *inside* individuals to focus on *the relation it contributes to create* between individuals and their social and cultural environments, emerging already within the first year of infants’ lives. We advanced that to make way into the intersubjective root of pretend play is only possible through a perspective shift: from thinking of pretence as a form of play set out to occur according to children’s age and milestone abilities, regardless of their individual interests, attitude, socio-cultural context, to viewing it as a situated, intersubjectively grounded activity where the meaning of previous interactional experiences changes along a continuum of explicitness and intersubjective relevance, so that the world of “is” becomes that of “as if” (Engel 2013).

Reconceptualising the development of pretence through the lens of a continuity approach to development has of course implications also for our theories of symbol formation and language development. The idea that infants are capable of displacing enactments that transcend the here and now and non-literal, well before they can decouple signifiers and meanings speaks for a more gradualist and non-categorical approach to the development of symbolic understanding and language. Our proposal is consistent with theories which view language not as a system of abstract symbols to be “cracked” by the child with cognitive maturation, but as a system emerging gradually from embodied multimodal ritualised interactions with others (Bruner 1983; Rohlfing et al. 2016; Rączaszek-Leonardi et al. 2018). Before children use props that stand for something else, before they become directors of imaginary worlds, they start off small, by being actors and enacting their own

⁴ Enactment, here, is meant in its broadest conception to include gestures, mimics, actions and communicative moves and expressions.

selves doing something unconventional. In a similar way, before symbols become decoupled and ungrounded, they might also start off small as meaningful, conventionalised ways of interacting.

Finally, such a shift in perspective, framing play as a participatory, intersubjective activity of meaning-making would allow grounding its analytical evidence through observations of how children coordinate and negotiate meanings in their daily routines as a way to create their own culture. We maintain that a similar focus should be extended also to include a situated and observational study of early forms of pretence interactions, such as clowning and teasing, in which interactional patterns evident in pretend play are performed by infants. Above all, we suggest that what these earlier and later forms of symbolic actions have in common is mostly their interpretative dimension: they are spaces in which infants and children can construct and explore different kinds of realities with meaningful others.

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